

A Whale of a Time

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Summary: What happened on earth in STIV: The Voyage Home AFTER Kirk et al. left with the whales?

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by Teresa Conaway & Suzanne Hinr

Anderson Hatfield slumped in his chair in the squad room, long, skinny legs propped up on a desk remarkably clear of clutter. The twinkle in his eyes betrayed his good mood despite his best efforts to appear somber.

It was Wednesday, December 14th, only seventeen more days until Hatfield's retirement after a modestly successful thirty year career. He had wrapped up his last case and looked forward to smooth sailing from now on. They never give tough or important cases to short-timers.

Hatfield heard his captain call out his name, or rather, his nickname. He swung his feet to the floor and sauntered toward the captain's office. As usual, he didn't move fast enough for his hyperactive young captain.

"Billy, you lazy bum, get in here!"

Hatfield quickened his pace, but only a little. The young Captain was antsy about losing his most experienced--and most decorated--detective. No use antagonizing him.

"What's up, Lou?" he asked, ducking slightly to avoid cracking his head on the door jam.

"Missing whale doctor. Check it out for me."

Hatfield took the manila file folder from the captain's outstretched hand. Missing whale doctor? He was sure it was Lou's idea of a joke. Nope. The file held a phone message from the Maritime Cetacean Institute. It was a missing whale doctor all right.

"Okay Lou. And stop callin' me 'Billy.'"

"Sure Billy, sure."

Hatfield grinned as he headed for his car. Everyone called him "Billy," short for "Hillbilly," and he always protested. He had been "Billy" to his co-workers for thirty years, ever since his rookie year when he had busted that serial rapist and the newspaper headline had read "Hatfield nabs McCoy." There was a ring of truth to the nickname, too. Anderson Hatfield hailed from the mountains of eastern Kentucky and was a direct descendent of Devil Anse Hatfield. Of course, in Pike County almost everyone could claim to be kin to Devil Anse.

Twenty minutes later he glided his unmarked police sedan into a parking space at the Maritime Cetacean Institute in Sausalito. A quick flash of his badge admitted him to the Director's office. He listened closely as the Director explained why he had called the police.

"You say his name is 'Gillian?'" Hatfield asked, writing the name into his notebook.

"Yes, except it's a woman. Gillian Taylor. Doctor Gillian Taylor."

"What kind of doctor is she?"

"Cetacean biologist. She specializes in humpback whales."

"When did you see her last?"

"Yesterday morning. She...uh...." Hatfield thought he detected a fleeting guilty look in the Director's eyes. Was he hiding something? He waited for him to continue. "She...we sort of had a fight. She gave me her best left hook," he said, rubbing his jaw, "called me a 'son-of-a-bitch,' and took off in her truck. I haven't seen her since. I've been calling her home practically every hour since then but I always get the answering machine."

"What did you fight about?"

Hatfield listened patiently to the story of George and Gracie. A woman whale doctor who drives a truck and physically abuses her boss. An interesting woman. Hatfield hoped he could find her just so he could get to know her better.

"Have you contacted her family?"

"She has none."

"Sounds to me like she's just a little upset. She'll probably come back in a day or two."

The Director shook his head. "At first I thought so, too. But, when she didn't come to work today I remembered something that happened the day before we had our...uh...disagreement, and I began to worry. That's why I called you."

"What happened?"

"The last full day Gillian was here she conducted the 11:30 tour. There--"

"Is it normal for an Assistant Director to conduct tours?"

"No. We were shorthanded that day and had an unusually high number of tourists. We all pitched in."

Hatfield made some notes.

"There were two men in Gillian's group who...well...Gillian had to throw them out."

"What did they look like?"

"I didn't see them. But later, Gillian referred to them as 'kooks.' Our security guard can describe them to you."

Hatfield nodded. It wasn't much of a clue. The two "kooks" probably had nothing to do with Gillian's disappearance. Heck, Gillian probably wasn't really missing anyway.

"Why did she throw the two men out?"

"One of them got into the tank with George and Gracie."

"In the tank?" Hatfield felt his eyes widen in disbelief and tried to cover himself by running his hand through his thick red hair.

"Actually, I didn't see any of this happen. No one did. But Gillian told the tour director about it."

Hatfield pulled his six-foot-four frame to his feet and tucked his notebook back in his pocket.

"I'd better speak to her before I leave."

He quickly realized how little anyone actually knew about the incident. Gillian had told the tour director only that she had had to throw out two men because one had gone for a swim with the whales.

Hatfield spotted a large book at the tour desk. Tourists seemed to be signing it before starting their tour.

The tour director noticed his interest in the book. "That's our guest register," she said. "Everyone who takes the tour signs it."

"Everyone?" Hatfield scanned back several days, surprised at the number of people who visited the Institute every day. He found

Gillian's last tour and had the tour guide photocopy the page for him. There had been sixteen people in her group.

Hatfield found the security guard, but his mind wandered as he listened to the guard explain how he had escorted the two men out of the Institute. He's obviously a body builder, Hatfield thought, admiring the young man's physique. He considered joining a gym when he retired.

"Oh yes! They were a strange pair!"

"How so?" Hatfield said, hoping the guard hadn't noticed his lapse of attention. He would have to concentrate. Just because he was close to retirement didn't mean he could get lazy.

"Well, one of them was fairly normal looking." The guard scratched his head and wrinkled his nose. "But, the other one--he was really strange."

"Strange? How?"

"He was tall, and had short black hair with bangs. Can you imagine a grown man with bangs? He was wearing a white robe and brown sandals. Oh, and he had a white headband around his head. He kept calling the other guy 'Admiral.' And...well...you're really going to think this is nuts, but, I swear his skin had a faint green tint to it."

"Green?" This is starting to get interesting, Hatfield thought. "Did the 'Admiral' call him by a name?"

"Yeah. At least I think it was a name. He called him 'Spock,' like the baby doctor."

Hatfield scanned the list of names from the tour book. About halfway down the page he found it. "Spock." Just one name, legibly written in a flowing hand. No home town was listed. The next name on the list was a Sister from a Catholic school in Los Angeles. The name above was "Jim Kirk" of Riverside, Iowa.

Hatfield made a mental note. That's probably the other one, he thought. He patted the guard on the back and thanked him for his help.

"Did you see where they went after they left?"

"Well, they didn't leave right away. They went to the little park across the street from the entrance and sat at the picnic table for a long time. The short one pointed over here a number of times. I'm sure they were talking about the Institute."

"What time did they actually leave the area?"

"I don't know. They were still there at 2:30. I left the gate for awhile to take care of another problem. When I got back at 3:15 they had gone. My shift ended at 4:00. Dr. Taylor left about fifteen minutes before I did."

Hatfield made a few hurried notes in his notebook.

"Listen," the guard said, lowering his voice and looking around cautiously. "There's something else I didn't tell the Director because I didn't want to get Dr. Taylor in trouble."

Lowering his voice conspiratorially, Hatfield told him to continue.

"I drove right by Dr. Taylor out on Route 1, on the other side of the bay. She had stopped her truck and was talking to those two guys."

"She was talking to them? Were they in the truck?"

"Not when I saw them. They were standing by the driver's door, talking to her."

Hatfield hastily made some notes. The two kooks were becoming more and more interesting. Instinct told him that they had had something to do with Gillian's disappearance, and his instincts were seldom wrong. Before he left the Institute he arranged for the guard to describe the two kooks to a police artist.

Half an hour later Hatfield waited patiently as the superintendent of a modest apartment building in Sausalito fumbled with some keys outside Gillian's apartment. When she finally got the door open she let him in and scampered quickly back to her apartment.

Hatfield took two steps in and stopped to survey the apartment. He liked what he saw. Gillian obviously had simple tastes, furnishing mostly with wicker. The wood floors had hand woven rugs placed attractively; tasteful art work depicting the sea graced the walls. He moved in cautiously, being careful not to touch anything.

No sign of a struggle, he thought. There was no sign of forced entry. The answering machine light was blinking so he played the messages. They were all from the Cetacean Institute Director.

There was an empty pizza box on the kitchen table. He wondered why she hadn't thrown it away. Under it was a receipt from Giuseppe's, a popular Italian restaurant near Golden Gate Park. It was dated Monday, the day the two kooks had visited the Institute. The cash register had time-stamped it at 5:30 p.m. One large pepperoni and mushroom pizza, extra onions, and two Michelob. Two? He pocketed the receipt.

He could find nothing else of interest in the apartment. Gillian seemed to lead a very spartan life. There was no television, no stereo, no expensive jewelry; and no sign that anything had been removed from the apartment. What there was in abundance was books. One whole wall of books in the living room; books about the sea, books about whales and other marine life, books of poetry, and classic literature.

Hatfield felt a twinge of embarrassment, as though he were intruding on a very private life. It was just standard police procedure, he reminded himself. But he still felt like a voyeur. He decided to go back to Headquarters to begin the reams of paperwork involved and to wait for the police artist sketches. He let his eyes take one last sweeping look around the apartment, then he quietly closed the door.

#

The dinner crowd hadn't arrived at Giuseppe's yet when Hatfield strolled in and flashed his badge. In another hour the popular pizzeria would be jam-packed with families with young children and teenagers on dates.

The manager nervously studied the receipt Hatfield showed her, worried that one of her employees was going to be arrested just when business was about to pick up. A number in the corner of the receipt identified the waiter who had taken the order. He wasn't due in for another thirty minutes.

With half-an-hour to kill and his stomach stimulated by the enticing aromas coming from the kitchen, Hatfield decided to have dinner. While he waited for his broccolini to be served he examined the two police artists sketches which had been produced from the description given by the Institute's security guard.

One man, medium height, curly auburn hair, hazel eyes, about 55 years old but with a pudgy, almost boyish face. This was the one called "Admiral." Admiral of what? Was it a nickname? Or did it really denote rank? The Cetacean Institute probably received some funding from the Navy or Coast Guard. Maybe he really was an Admiral. But then, if he were, why would Gillian have called him a "kook"?

The other one was really odd. Tall, black hair with bangs, black eyes, about 65 years old, though it was hard to tell. Wearing a robe, sandals, and a headband. Almost like a geriatric hippy, Hatfield thought, chuckling quietly at his own joke. Was his name really "Spock"? Was it a first name or a last name? The sketch didn't show it but Hatfield remembered the guard saying there was a faint green tint to Spock's skin. Should he chalk that up to an overactive imagination? The young man had seemed too alert and too serious to have been mistaken.

The detective's chain of thought was broken when his waitress put a big plate of broccolini and a basket of garlic bread on the table in front of him, and a paper bib around his neck. Broccolini was messy and ties were expensive.

He was savoring the last of the garlic, butter, olive oil, and romano cheese flavors when he noticed the manager pointing at him and a young man walking toward his table.

"Hi," the young man said, holding out his hand. "I'm Steve. You're waiting to see me?"

Hatfield waved him to sit down. "You are if you're the man who took this order on Monday night," he said, handing Steve the receipt.

Steve studied it closely. "Well, it's my order, but I take a lot of orders. I don't remember anything about this one in particular."

Hatfield pulled out the picture of Gillian and showed it to the young man. "Does this help?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, party of two. I remember them."

"Party of two? Just two?"

"Yes, that woman, and a man."

"Was the man one of these two?" Hatfield put the sketches on the table in front of him.

"That one," Steve said, pointing to the drawing of the Admiral.

"You never saw the other man?"

Steve studied the picture of Spock and shook his head. "Well, he definitely wasn't with the other two. I don't think I've seen him any other time."

"You said you remember them. Is there anything that makes you remember them in particular?"

"Yes. Just as I brought their pizza to the table they were getting up as if they were in a hurry to leave. It was almost like the man was rushing her to leave before she was ready. I had to put the pizza in a take out box."

"Did you hear any of their conversation?"

"No, not really."

"Did you--"

"Except for something odd when they were about to leave."

"Something odd?"

"Yeah, well, I thought they were just joking but it was the only thing I heard them say." Hatfield waited for him to continue. "I asked who was to get the check and she said to the man something like, 'Don't tell me they don't use money in the twenty-third century.' And he said, 'Well, we don't!'"

"Twenty-third century? You're sure she said twenty-third century?"

"Yep, sure as I'm sitting here."

"Then she paid the bill?"

"She took it. You'd have to ask the cashier whether she actually paid it or not."

"Was there anything in particular you remember about the man?"

The young man shook his head. "Not really, except he was dressed kinda unusual. It was a suit but not really a suit. It had no lapels, and he wasn't wearing a tie."

That matches the description the security guard gave, Hatfield thought. From what Hatfield had learned so far, there was something about this "Admiral" that seemed just a little out of place. As

though he belonged here, but didn't belong here.

"Oh yeah, and there was the beeper thing," Steve suddenly blurted.

"Beeper thing?"

"His beeper went off, but when he took it out of his pocket he didn't just turn it off. He spoke into it."

"Spoke into it? You're sure it was a beeper?"

"I don't really know. I was over at that table," he said, pointing at a table about ten feet away. "It sounded like a beeper. We get a lot of doctors from Mercy Hospital in here, so I've heard beepers go off before. But usually they don't talk into them."

"You didn't hear what he said?"

"No. It was too noisy. We were real busy."

Before leaving, Hatfield gave Steve one of his business cards and asked him to call if he saw the woman or either of the men again. He also talked to the cashier, but she had no recollection of the woman.

The next morning Hatfield was slightly depressed at the sight of his near-empty desk. He didn't like being a one-case cop. But, as long as one case was all he had, he would put everything he had into it.

He didn't stay depressed for long. Before he removed his coat his phone rang. It was the Golden Gate Park patrol. They had found an abandoned truck registered to Gillian Taylor. Did he want to come look at it?

The first thing he noticed when he arrived on the scene was the burn marks on the blue pickup's side. The lab boys were already there, taking fingerprints and photographs. Ordinarily a missing person case with no evidence of foul play wouldn't bring to bear all the resources of the metropolitan police force. But, after thirty years service, Hatfield still had hundreds of favors to collect. Use'em or lose'em, was his motto.

"Any good prints, Dimples?" Hatfield asked, leaning into the truck so as not to touch anything.

"Couple of good sets, very fresh," Dimples grunted, without getting out of the truck.

"Anything else?"

"Some hairs."

"What color?"

Reluctantly Sergeant Dimples backed out of the truck and stood by Hatfield. They looked like Mutt and Jeff, Hatfield towering over the short, overweight Dimples. "Look, Billy," Dimples said affectionately, "you gonna let me get my job done or what?"

Hatfield chuckled. "As soon as you tell me what color the hair is."

"Well, I won't know for sure until we get back to the lab, but it looks like two kinds. One kind is blonde. Long blonde hairs. The other is jet black. Short and very fine."

"What about those burn marks on the side?"

"They're just burn marks. Nothing unusual about them. But they're fairly fresh. There's lots of dirt under them but very little on top."

Hatfield examined the area while the little man finished his work. The truck was parked just off Chain Lakes Drive, closer to the lake than to the Senior Center. There was a fair sized clearing surrounded by light woods, a quiet area with little traffic. Nearby there was a Sanitation Department depository where trash cans were emptied every morning. He would have to talk to the garbage collectors; maybe they had seen something.

Suddenly he stumbled and fell to the ground.

"Damn," he said out loud at the twinge in his left ankle. Just what he needed: to go out in a blaze of medical disability.

He realized that he had fallen because of a sudden dip in the ground. He pulled himself to his knees and examined the spot. There was an indentation in the ground. Good God, the whole area was one big pit, as though something very, very heavy, and very large, had rested here. The depression was sharp and angular; it was obviously unnatural. The grass in and around the pit was scorched and brittle. About ten yards into the pit he noticed something metallic.

A trash can. A crushed trash can. It was absolutely flat, and charred black, presumably from the same fire that had scorched Gillian's truck.

He gave the crushed trash can to Dimples for lab study and asked him to examine the pit, too. Dimples groaned. "How much longer you got until retirement, Billy?" he asked wistfully.

Hatfield laughed and slapped Dimples on the back. While the lab crew finished, Hatfield wandered into the nearby wooded area. About fifty feet into the woods there was another, smaller clearing.

"Jesus!" Hatfield exclaimed. "A helicopter?!"

Hatfield approached the helicopter cautiously. What on earth is a helicopter doing in the middle of Golden Gate Park? Quietly, he reached for his revolver and took cover near a tree. "Police," he called out. "Anybody in there?" When no one answered he opened the door, using his handkerchief to prevent smudging any fingerprints.

His knowledge of helicopters was limited. He recognized it from his Marine Corps days as a Huey, but didn't know what model. He noticed a line on the ground which ran into the cargo bay, but there was no cargo in the 'copter. Drug runners, he wondered. Was there a connection between this helicopter and Gillian? There had to be. It

was too big a coincidence, and Hatfield didn't believe in coincidences. He wrote the 'copter's ID number in his notebook.

As Hatfield was about to leave, he noticed a piece of paper lying on the floor, fished out the tweezers he always carried, and picked up the paper. An invoice from a company called "Plexicorp," it was filled with cryptic figures that didn't mean much to him and signed by someone named "H. Sulu." He carefully put the paper into a plastic baggie, another of the detective's tool. "Dimples will never believe this," he said out loud.

"Dammit, Billy," Dimples snapped, when Hatfield showed him the newest evidence, his temper short. "I got work to do back at the lab. Will you please stop finding things for me to dust!"

"This makes us even, Dimples. No more favors owed." He handed Dimples the plastic baggie. "I'll need that back as soon as you're finished with it."

#

Before going back to his office to await the lab reports and to trace the abandoned helicopter, Hatfield went home to change clothes. His fall in the pit had soiled his trousers and left him feeling grungy.

He parked his police sedan in front of the small frame house where he had lived for the last twenty-five years, noticing that the real estate agent had attached "sold" to the "for sale" sign posted out front. The new owners would take possession the day after he retired. He was wasting no time going home to Pike County. He wouldn't miss this place. Since his wife had died three years before, it had been lonely despite the precocious teenage son he had been left to raise alone.

The living room was filled with boxes, each one carefully labeled with a list of its contents. He had put his son in charge of organizing the move; the sixteen-year-old was proving especially adept at the job.

Too adept, Hatfield thought. Three times already he had had to argue Ran'al out of packing up his father's computer and the stacks of paper on his desk. Each stack represented an outline for a mystery novel Hatfield planned to write once he retired. Thirty years on the police force had given him dozens of story ideas. He had even had a few short stories published in mystery magazines and he couldn't wait to devote full time to writing the novels he had been working out in his head for years.

He detoured into Ran'al's room. When the boy was home Hatfield faithfully obeyed the "No Humans Allowed" sign posted conspicuously on the door. But whenever he could Hatfield stole a glance into the forbidden territory, just to be sure the little genius wasn't constructing an atomic bomb in his room.

Nope. No bomb this time. Merely the usual assortment of "Star Wars," "Buck Rogers," and "The Last Starfighter" collectibles. Models of space ships were suspended from the ceiling; the bookcase was filled with science fiction novels. Hatfield wondered when Ran'al would decide it was time to pack his own things. Probably not until the

last minute.

In his own room Hatfield put on a pair of pants that had just come from the cleaners. He exchanged his suit coat for a sport jacket and examined himself in the mirror. Lou won't like it, he thought. Suits--not sports jackets--were standard attire for detectives. But, this close to retirement Hatfield didn't really care much about dress codes. Besides, Ran'al had already packed most of his clothes. He didn't have a lot of options.

The detective set out for his office with anticipation. If his instincts were right he now had two more good leads now: Plexicorp and the abandoned helicopter. What do they have to do with Gillian's disappearance he wondered as he pulled his sedan onto the expressway. And what would the lab boys turn up?

Unfortunately, the lab boys had not turned up a whole lot. But what they did report was intriguing. At first Hatfield suspected they were pulling his leg, but he knew better. Not on an official report.

There had been three fresh sets of prints in the truck. One, on the driver's side, was Gillian's. The other two were unidentified. But, one set was--to quote the report--"unlike any fingerprints we have ever encountered." Not exactly swirls and ridges, the report said, but not altered in any apparent way. Just... different, denoting skin that wasn't exactly...human.

The hairs were even more perplexing. The long blonde hairs matched hairs they had obtained from a brush at Gillian's apartment. But the short black hairs left the lab boys at a loss for words. It wasn't human--there's that word again Hatfield thought--but it wasn't animal hair either. At least, it wasn't from any of the usual animals the police lab worked with--dog, cat, monkey, and horse. They had sent the hair to the University to study but no response was expected for weeks.

The helicopter and invoice had yielded only one set of fresh prints, and they didn't match any taken from the truck. A medium length black hair taken from the headphone band did not match those from the truck.

More clues, but also more mystery.

*

What is this man hiding?, Hatfield wondered. After thirty years as a cop he could tell a lie as soon as it was spoken. And this man was most certainly lying.

"Look Dr. Nichols," Hatfield said, his voice rising, "I've been to the front office." He waived the invoice in front of Nichols' face. "These are your initials here next to the signature of the man who picked up--"

"But, my initials could have--"

"AND, your company's bookkeepers maintain very good records," Hatfield continued, playing his trump card. "This invoice for \$1,277.00 was paid by your personal check." He waited a moment to let

this information sink in. "Now, I'm looking for a missing woman and you are somehow connected. Are you gonna talk to me here? Or do I have to take you downtown?"

Nichols stared at his shoes for a moment, considering. When he looked up he noticed how hushed the usually roaring plant had become. Every employee within earshot was doing his best to eavesdrop.

Finally, he said, "Let's go in my office." As soon as the door was closed behind them Nichols burst out what he knew.

"I thought it was fishy. Those two willing to give me a formula for something worth millions....billions!" he exclaimed, his brow breaking out in perspiration. "But I thought it was just corporate espionage or something. I didn't think anyone would get hurt. I--"

"Slow down, for Christ's sake," Hatfield interrupted. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The two men who gave me the formula."

"What two men and what formula? Wait...just start from the beginning."

Nichols took a deep breath and flopped into a seat behind his desk. He waived Hatfield to a seat.

"It was Monday morning. We were backlogged, trying to get a rush order out on time," he began. "These two men came in. One of them--"

Hatfield interrupted to ask, "Was it these two?" He showed Nichols the police sketches of the Admiral and Spock.

Nichols looked at the sketches and shook his head firmly. "No, not even close."

"Okay, go on."

"Well, one of them came to my office and introduced himself as Len McCoy, Doctor Len McCoy, personal assistant to Professor Montgomery Scott at the University of Edinburgh. He said it like he expected me to know who he was."

"McCoy?" Hatfield interjected.

Nichols nodded, then laughed when he realized the connection. "Yeah, he was the real McCoy. A real smoothie."

"And you didn't know who he was?"

"Nah, never heard of him, nor this Professor Scott. He said Plexicorp corporate headquarters had hired Professor Scott to come inspect our plant and make recommendations on how to improve our quality control. When he realized I didn't know anything about it he got very upset." Nichols reached behind him and opened the small refrigerator. "You want a soda?" he asked Hatfield.

As they opened their drinks Hatfield motioned Nichols to

continue.

"I mean, he was really scared of what was gonna happen when he told this Scott fellow that someone had screwed up and hadn't told me about the inspection. He said Scott had a wicked temper....and boy, was he right!"

"Scott was here?"

"Yeah, I felt sorry for the guy, so I offered to take them on the tour personally."

"You didn't call the front office first to verify the inspection?"

"No. I guess I should have, but I figured it would be less trouble to give the guy the standard thirty-minute tour and get rid of him than to spend an hour on the phone trying to get authorization. After all, we don't do anything that's considered secret."

"Where was Scott while all this was going on?"

"He was out wandering around the initial processing area. I went out to meet him and when McCoy explained that there had been a mistake and I didn't know anything about the inspection, he exploded! I had no idea Scotsmen had such wicked tempers."

"Scotsman? Do you think he was genuinely Scottish?"

"No mistake about it. His brogue was so thick you could have cut it with a knife. He started ranting about having come millions of miles on an invited tour--"

"Millions?"

"Yeah, well, McCoy corrected him real quick. But, he did say 'millions.' Then he started demanding to see the owners. Fortunately he was placated by my offer to show him the plant myself."

"What did you show them?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing that he couldn't have seen in any other plexiglass factory." Nichols took a long swig from his soda. "He sure knew his engineering inside and out. I was very impressed."

"Ok, so what does all this have to do with the invoice?"

Hatfield listened patiently as Nichols told him about the formula for "transparent aluminum." Six times as strong as plexiglass and only one tenth as expensive. It was easy to manufacture and, as far as Nichols knew, not in production anywhere in the world. There hadn't even been anything in the professional journals about it. All they wanted in return for the formula was one sheet of six-inch thick plexiglass, sixty feet by ten feet, for pickup at dawn on Tuesday.

Hatfield ran his hand through his hair and slumped down in his chair. "You expect me to believe that these two guys gave you a formula potentially worth millions...even billions....of dollars for just one

\$1200 piece of plexiglass?"

Nichols squirmed in his seat. "Look, I know it sounds fantastic, but that was it. I have the formula, they have the plexiglass. I even paid for it so the company can't accuse me of embezzling." A puzzled look came over his face. "What does all this have to do with a missing woman?"

Hatfield shook his head. "I can't discuss that right now. I haven't finished my investigation....Did they happen to tell you what they wanted the plexiglass for?"

"Not really. But, when he first brought it up, he phrased his question in terms of how thick a piece of plexiglass would have to be at sixty feet by ten feet to withstand the pressure of 18,000 cubic feet of water. I presume they wanted it to hold water."

"Water?" Hatfield mused. A big aquarium maybe?

Hatfield sighed. He wasn't sure what to make of this information. Maybe it wasn't connected to Gillian's disappearance after all.

"Did they touch anything while they were in your office?"

Nichols thought for a moment. "Yes. They both touched my computer," he said, pointing in the direction of the Apple Macintosh.

"Has anyone else touched it since then?"

"No, I haven't used it and no one else is allowed to use it."

"I'll want to get it dusted for prints. Don't let anyone touch it until the lab boys have been here."

Nichols nodded his assent. "Funny thing about the computer."

"Funny? What?"

"Well, McCoy suggested to Scott that he use my computer to demonstrate the formula. Scott sat down in front of it and at first I thought he didn't know how to use it."

"Why?"

"Instead of reaching for the mouse or the keyboard, he just said, 'Computer.' And when nothing happened, he said it again. Then McCoy noticed the mouse and handed it to him; but instead of using it the way a mouse is supposed to be used, he spoke into it like a microphone. I couldn't help but wonder what advanced computers they must be using at the University of Edinburgh if they're able to process verbal programming."

"Did he ever figure it out?"

"Oh, yes. I told him to use the keyboard. He got this real condescending look on his face, said 'A keyboard. How quaint.' Then he tore into it. I tell you, the man knows his stuff."

"When did they pick up the product?"

"They didn't. Another man, named Sulu, Hikaru Sulu--very nice oriental fellow--picked it up Tuesday morning, with a helicopter."

'A helicopter!' thought Hatfield. 'Bingo!'

"He wasn't here long. Just long enough to hook it up and haul it away."

"What did these guys look like?"

Nichols thought for a moment. "McCoy was an American. I'd say southern. He had a slight southern accent, but it was barely noticeable, as though he hadn't lived in the south for a long time. He was about 60 years old, I guess. Maybe 5'11" tall. Graying chestnut brown hair, bright blue eyes, a broad smile. Unusual clothes. Otherwise unremarkable."

"And Scott?"

"He's harder to describe. About the same height and age as McCoy. Salt and pepper hair--mainly salt, mustache..." Nichols rolled his eyeballs up, as though trying to look into his memory. "Overweight. Funny clothes. Black trousers and a maroon jacket over a white sweater. It almost looked like a military uniform with the insignia removed."

"What about Sulu?"

"He was just an average Asian-American. Probably Japanese ancestry. Round face, almond shaped eyes, black hair, very deep voice. Dressed very stylishly. I asked him where he got his cape/jacket. He laughed and said 'Somewhere way far away.' I guess he travels a lot."

I bet he does, thought Hatfield. "If you had to summarize your impression of them into one sentence, what would it be?"

"That's easy," Nichols said. "They seemed out of place, ahead of their time."

Hatfield shook his head. That was exactly what he had been thinking. Quickly he arranged for Nichols to go to headquarters to describe McCoy and Scott to a police artist, and he reminded the plant manager not to let anyone in his office until the lab had dusted.

Nichols offered to walk Hatfield to his car. Once they were outside he stopped Hatfield and spoke, almost pleading.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Do? Do about what?"

"Are you going to report the formula or tell my company?"

Hatfield shrugged his shoulders. "Near as I can tell, Dr. Nichols, since you paid for the product no crime was committed. Patent theft and industrial espionage are out of my jurisdiction. I don't intend to do anything about it. But..." he added quickly when he saw Nichols relax, "if we get anything from the Feds about it, I'll have to report what I know."

Nichols nodded his understanding and watched as the detective drove away.

#

Hatfield arrived at his office to find two notes waiting for him on his desk. One was from Sgt. Banner of the Golden Gate Park patrol. Banner had located two city garbage collectors who said they had seen something unusual in the park the morning of December 12th. Hatfield called the Sanitation Department and arranged to meet with the two men at 2:30, just before their shift ended.

The other note was from a patrolman in the Mission District. Hatfield had asked all the precincts to show Gillian's picture to emergency room personnel at hospitals in their jurisdiction. Sometimes missing persons were found unconscious or suffering from amnesia in hospitals.

The patrolman's note said that a Dr. Kevin Cross at Mercy Hospital remembered seeing Gillian there on December 13, but had been reluctant to talk about it. The patrolman sensed that the doctor had been hiding something.

Before he left for the hospital, Hatfield made a few calls in an attempt to track down the mysterious helicopter's owner. His contact at the FAA told him it was registered to Bay Aviation, a small charter company.

At Mercy Hospital Hatfield located Dr. Cross in the emergency room, stitching a nasty looking leg wound for a woman whose horse had thrown her in the park. Hatfield identified himself and showed Cross the picture of Gillian.

"Have you ever seen this woman?"

Cross looked at the picture and then at Hatfield. I already told another officer that I had."

"When? Where?"

For several moments Cross concentrated on his stitchery. Hatfield suspected he was stalling.

"Look, Doctor, I can wait till you're finished and we can have this conversation downtown."

The word "downtown" had the desired effect. Cross looked up and shook his head.

"I'll tell you everything I know, Sergeant. But...." he looked down at his patient, "I don't think I should do it here."

Hatfield nodded his understanding. "I'll wait at the nurses' station."

While he waited, Hatfield called the police artist and arranged to have Dr. Nichols's sketches of "McCoy," "Scott," and "Sulu" brought to him immediately. When they arrived, Hatfield added them to the two from the Institute, spread them all out on a counter, and studied

them intently.

Five middle-aged or elderly men, none of whom acted at all middle-aged or elderly. This one, he thought, pointing at the geriatric hippy named "Spock," jumped into fish tanks and swam with whales. This one, he pointed to "Admiral Kirk," seemed eerily out of place. Now these three. He picked up the sketches of McCoy, Scott, and Sulu.

This can't be a naval operation. Most of the men were too old for that. For that matter, they were too old to be spies. So who the hell are they? Where did they get a multi-billion dollar industrial formula, and why were they willing to give it away for \$1200 in product?

He looked closely at the sketch of McCoy. He didn't look like any of the McCoys he knew back in Pike County, where you couldn't swing a dead cat o' nine tails without hitting a McCoy. Or a Hatfield, he thought, grinning. Or a Mullins, Maynard, or Ratliff.

The sketch was in black and white, but he remembered how Dr. Nichols had described McCoy's eyes--bright and mischievous. None of the McCoys he knew had blue eyes. What kind of spy had mischievous eyes?

The second one--Scott-- was nondescript. But the sketch didn't show his two outstanding features: a thick Scottish brogue and a knowledge of engineering and computers sufficient to impress Dr. Nichols. No, make that three features--a hot temper. But that could have been for show.

Finally--Sulu--the chopper driver. He knew less about Sulu than the others. Friendly, Nichols had said, with a deep voice and exotic clothes.

What did he have? A self-proclaimed Iowan who may or may not be an Admiral. A displaced southerner with unforgettable eyes, a "real smoothie." An overweight Scotsman who could dance circles around most engineers. A friendly oriental. And one who was impossible to categorize--the enigmatic Spock.

Hatfield jumped slightly when Dr. Cross tapped him on the shoulder. "Let's go in here," Cross said, pointing to an vacant examining room. "I've asked the Chief of Staff to join us."

Hatfield listened patiently as Dr. Cross told him about the man brought in by ambulance from Alameda, a head injury who needed immediate surgery.

"Was Gillian Taylor with him?" Hatfield asked, wondering what this had to do with his case.

"No. I'm getting to that."

Just then the door opened and an older, smartly dressed man entered and introduced himself.

"Dr. Stanton, Chief of Staff." He took the only chair in the room and told Cross to continue.

"Ok," Cross said, taking a deep breath. He told how the head of his service had sent him up to the OR to assist with the man's surgery. He had never assisted in neurosurgery and this would have been a good experience for him.

"Would have been?"

"Yes, well, just as Dr. Howard was about to open the patient's skull, two men came rushing into the room with a gurney. The woman you are looking for was on the gurney."

"You told the Sgt. Banner that she hadn't been a patient."

"She wasn't. She hopped off the gurney as soon as they came in the door. One of them was a doctor, he--"

"Whoa! How do you know one of them was a doctor?"

Cross glanced briefly at his Chief, who made a noncommittal shrug. "I just do. He acted like a doctor. He just looked like a doctor. He looked...he looked just like my dad, who is a country doctor in Arkansas. I just know the look."

"Convince me."

Cross shuffled his feet before continuing. "He had probing blue eyes. Intense blue eyes. Even with all the chaos going on around him, he saw nothing but the patient. He argued with Dr. Howard over the proper treatment. He sure sounded like he knew his stuff."

"Blue eyes? Was he one of these men?" Hatfield pulled out his 5 sketches and laid them on the examining table.

"That's him," Cross said immediately, pointing to the one named McCoy.

"Are you sure?"

"No doubt about it."

Hatfield picked up the sketch. "So it really is Dr. McCoy," Hatfield mumbled to himself. "Do you recognize any of the others?"

Cross pointed quickly to the one probably named Kirk. "This one seemed to be in charge."

"Ok, then what happened?"

"That one, the one in charge, pointed a little box at us--he acted as though it were a weapon--and herded us into the supply room. He used the little box to melt the lock."

"Melted?!"

"Yes. It emitted some kind of ray that melted the lock."

Hatfield ran his hands through his hair and widened his eyes in disbelief.

"Hoo boy, son. Ain't no one downtown gonna believe this one."

Cross looked at Dr. Stanton and chuckled. "It gets worse."

"Huh?"

"The supply room door has a window. We watched as that one--the doctor-- placed a little machine--about the size of a microcassette recorder--on the patient's forehead. Some lights blinked. He talked to the patient. Both of them did. We couldn't hear what they were saying.

"I thought the patient was unconscious."

"He was. Or, he had been. After a minute or two he opened his eyes and talked. He was comatose from a serious head injury. He shouldn't have been able to talk."

"Where was Gillian during all this?"

"She was beside the table, just watching."

"Then what happened?"

"They wheeled him out on the gurney. That was the last I saw any of them."

Hatfield mulled over this information for a few moments. "Did they let you out of the supply room?"

"No. They must have done something suspicious on the way out because the two cops guarding the door came into the OR and found us."

"Cops?! Why were there cops guarding the door? Who was this patient?"

Dr. Stanton stood and patted the younger doctor on the back. "I think I'd better take it from here, Dr. Cross."

When the door closed behind Cross, Hatfield didn't wait for Stanton to begin. "What the hell is this all about, Doctor? Who was that patient? What happened to him?"

"Naval Intelligence brought him in. They used a civilian ambulance and city policemen so as not to raise anyone's suspicions."

"Naval Intelligence? Why?"

"All I know, Sergeant, is that the patient's name is Chekov. That's C-H-E-K-O-V. He was arrested for espionage aboard the Enterprise in Alameda."

Hatfield shook his head, hoping that would sort out all the information he had crammed in there in the last forty-eight hours. "You're telling me that this guy, this patient, was a spy."

"Yes."

"And that Gillian Taylor helped him escape?"

"I never saw her, but everyone in the OR at the time has confirmed Dr. Cross's identification." He pointed to the sketches. "We've never seen those sketches before though. If you'd like, I can have the rest of the OR team look at them."

"That won't be necessary." Hatfield plopped into the chair Stanton had vacated. "What happened after they left the OR?"

"Well, Sergeant, the police officers gave chase through the corridors. I think you'd better ask them what happened. They were from the Mission precinct."

Hatfield looked surprised for a moment but then took the hint. Whatever had happened, it was sure to be unbelievable.

"There was one other strange thing that happened that day, Sergeant, that I hesitate to mention."

"Strange?"

"Here is the name and address of a patient who apparently had some contact with one of the...visitors. I think you should talk to her."

Hatfield took the piece of paper Stanton offered him. He looked intensely at Stanton, trying to read his thoughts. He finally gave up.

"I'll have a police artist come down to make a sketch of Chekov from Dr. Cross's description."

"That won't be necessary, Sergeant. The Navy has a picture of him."

Hatfield nodded. He should have known. He wondered what else the Navy knew.

#

Before his appointment with the garbage collectors, Hatfield had time to stop at the Mission precinct to talk to the officers who had guarded the OR at Mercy Hospital. He came away more perplexed than ever.

According to the officers, they had let Kirk and McCoy wheel Gillian into the OR at 6:12 a.m. against their orders because she seemed to be in a lot of pain. At 6:17 all three rushed out, wheeling another man--the missing patient-- on the gurney. They had given chase, thought they had cornered the four in an elevator, and... then they vanished. Vanished at 6:21 a.m. in the middle of a busy hospital, with two apparently capable officers in hot pursuit.

Hatfield pounded his hands on the steering wheel. This was starting to sound more like one of Ran'al's science fiction novels than one of his own detective stories.

His interview with the garbage collectors was stranger still. They were reluctant to talk, afraid that he would think them crazy and

report it to their supervisors. They didn't want to lose their jobs; the city paid its sanitation maintenance engineers hefty salaries. Finally, but only after Hatfield had promised them confidentiality, they told him what they knew.

"We were doing our usual rounds in the park, you know, when--"

"What day was that?"

The short round man looked at his taller, beanpole partner. The beanpole answered. "It was two days ago. December 12."

"Okay. Go on."

"Well," continued the shorter man, "this huge, invisible thing came down out of the sky and landed. The wind nearly blew us away. We had to hang onto the truck for dear life."

"If it was invisible, how did you know it was there? Couldn't it have just been a squall?"

"Shoot man, I knew he wouldn't believe us." The short man looked at the tall man in disgust. "Why are we wasting our time?"

The taller man looked at Hatfield and swallowed hard.

"Well...uh...you see, it opened, and--"

"Opened?"

"Yeah, it opened. Like a door opened and bright light came out. It...it was like a big ladder was lowered to the ground, and a bunch of people came walkin' out."

"People?"

"Yeah man. It was really weird. They just came out of no where, about twenty feet in the sky," the short one said. "Fred got a better look at them than I did."

Hatfield looked at Fred.

"There were seven of them. I was so scared I kept counting them as we drove away. There were definitely seven."

"All men?"

"Hard to tell. There was definitely one woman. A black woman. I noticed that right off. She was the only black one. There was one who might have been a man or a woman. I couldn't tell. He....she....whatever it was, was wearing a long white robe."

"That would be Spock," Hatfield mumbled to himself. Fred and his short friend looked at each other, bewildered. "What did they do?" Hatfield asked.

"Hell, man, we didn't hang around to find out. We took off."

"I don't blame you."

#

That night Hatfield sat in his sparse living room and thought hard. No TV, no notes, no radio. He just thought.

He was still slightly overwhelmed by the things he had learned that day, especially from the old lady whose name and address Dr. Stanton had given him.

A new kidney. The one named McCoy had given her a new kidney. At least, he had given her a pill that made her grow a new kidney. Last week she had been dying. Today she was the picture of health.

His first reaction had been disbelief. Quickly, however, he realized that almost everything about the case was beyond belief. Besides, Dr. Stanton wouldn't have sent him to see her if it weren't true.

Hatfield closed his eyes and squeezed hard. The result was another headache. But underneath the headache was the answer. He thought he knew what had happened to Gillian Taylor; but he dare not say it out loud.

#

After a good night's sleep Hatfield's headache had gone away and his crazy idea about Gillian's disappearance couldn't withstand the sunlight. By the time he finished breakfast, showered, shaved, and dressed, he had convinced himself that the Navy would explain everything.

The Navy. Thank God it wasn't the Army. Hatfield had contacts in Naval Intelligence from his days in the Marines. They might not tell another cop what was going on, but he was sure they'd tell him.

On his way to Alameda, Hatfield decided to check out a hunch. It was early morning; about the same time Gillian had left Mercy Hospital with the Admiral, Spock, and Chekov. He drove to the area in the park where they had found Gillian's pickup truck. He parked and waited, though not quite sure what he was waiting for. After a few minutes two joggers, a man and a woman, came around the bend. Hatfield got out of his car and waited for them to come closer.

Hatfield showed them his badge and asked to speak to them.

"Do you jog here every morning at this time?"

"Yes," the woman said. "What's wrong?"

"I'm investigating a case. Did you jog here on December 13?"

The woman, jogging in place, looked at her partner before answering. "Yes, we won't forget that day."

"Why not?"

"Well....as we got just about to here, a tremendous roar erupted--"

"And a terrible wind," her companion added. "It would have blown us away if we hadn't grabbed that fence and hung on for dear life."

"Do you know what caused it?"

"Haven't a clue," the woman said. "It lasted about thirty seconds."

"The closest thing to it that I ever felt," the man added, "was when I went to see the Space Shuttle launch last year."

Hatfield took the joggers' names and phone numbers and thanked them for their help. His crazy theory about Gillian's disappearance was looking saner by the minute.

Hatfield headed for Alameda. His former commanding officer's son worked in Naval Intelligence. A bright young Lieutenant, Annapolis grad, who knew Hatfield had saved his Dad's life in Korea. Twice. He would tell Hatfield whatever national security permitted.

Hatfield left Alameda satisfied. Satisfied, that is, that Chip had told him everything he knew. As luck would have it, Chip had accompanied the intelligence officer who responded to the Enterprise's call that night. He had actually talked to the Russian.

There was no doubt the guy was Russian, Chip had said. "Either he was the stupidest damn Russian I have ever met, or he was the slyest." When he was captured in the reactor room he had only three possessions: a little box that appeared to be a communication device, another little box that the prisoner treated as if it were a weapon, and a wallet with a photo ID card and some sort of computer key card.

The devices had been sent to the C.I.A. lab in Washington, D.C. for analysis, but Chip had shown Hatfield photos of them. Chip still had the wallet and the Russian's clothes which he let Hatfield examine.

The ID card showed an attractive, dark-haired man, about forty years old, identifying the bearer as Pavel Andrevich Chekov. Below the name was printed "Commander" and below that, "Service Number 656-5827D." The most disturbing thing about the ID was the issuing organization: "Starfleet, United Federation of Planets."

"Obviously a phony ID. Some kind of nut." Chip had said.

"Obviously," Hatfield pretended to agree. Of course it was phony. Of course Chekov was a nut. Of course it was perfectly consistent with what Hatfield believed had happened. The Navy had not helped.

Chip gave him copies of the ID photo in exchange for photos of Gillian. The Navy had not known who the mysterious woman was; now Hatfield would not be the only one looking for her.

*

On his way back from Alameda, Hatfield stopped at Bay Aviation.

Hank, the manager, told him that he had reported the 'copter stolen

the same morning that Gillian had disappeared. It had been taken the night before.

Hatfield roamed around the grounds, showing Sulu's sketch to pilots and mechanics. Had any of them seen him? Finally, he hit pay dirt. A mechanic named Joe recognized Sulu as the man he'd found sitting in the missing Huey when he came out to service it one morning.

"He was real friendly. Said his name was Hikaru Sulu," Joe told Hatfield as he worked on a small helicopter's engine. "Strange name. But then, he was an oriental fellow."

"Did he say anything else?"

"Hell, yes," Joe said, swearing under his breath at a stubborn bolt. "He talked plenty. Asked lots of questions."

"What kind of questions?"

"Oh, about the Huey. You know...what its maximum cargo load was, what kind of fuel it used. He already knew a lot about 'copters but he was awfully interested in that one."

"Did he say why?"

"Nah, not really. Just that he had flown one like it at the Academy."

"Academy? What Academy?"

Joe looked up from the engine for the first time. He looked at Hatfield vacantly. "I don't think he said. I just assumed it was Colorado Springs."

*

Back at his office Hatfield called West Point, Annapolis, Colorado Springs, New London, and King's Point. No one named Sulu had ever attended any of them. For good measure he called all the state maritime academies, V.M.I., The Citadel, Norwich, and North Georgia, with the same result. No one named Sulu had ever attended any American, four-year, college-level, military academy.

When he hung up after the last phone call Hatfield leaned back in his chair and propped his feet on his desk. Only fifteen more days till he retired. Solving this case was a matter of personal honor; but, if he was right about what had happened to Gillian Taylor, he would have to keep it to himself. He had to prove himself wrong; he had to find Gillian. His mind was methodically running through all his evidence for the tenth time that morning when a tapping on his desk caused him to open his eyes.

"You Hatfield?" asked the tall, black motorcycle cop standing beside his desk. He had his helmet under one arm and was slapping his thigh with the black leather gloves in his other hand. Motorcycle cops were a breed by themselves, especially in San Francisco.

"Yeah," Hatfield said cautiously, pulling his feet to the floor and sitting up.

"You looking for this guy?" The cop held up a copy of the picture of Chekov which Hatfield had circulated.

"Yeah. You know anything about him?"

"I saw him a couple days ago. It was the 12th, around 10:00 a.m.. Him and a pretty black chick."

"Where?" Hatfield sat up straighter. This sounded promising.

"Ah, it was the corner of Jason and Mathers Street, downtown."

"What were they doing? Did you talk to them?"

"Nah, well, they talked to me. They were trying to get directions to Alameda."

Hatfield waited for a moment for the cop to continue.

"Well, did you give him directions?"

"Nah, they didn't look right to me. They were....strange. I watched them for awhile. They stopped a couple'a people to ask for directions."

And he stood there like a jerk staring at them from behind his aviators, I'll bet, thought Hatfield. No wonder tourists had such a low opinion of San Francisco police.

"What was strange about them?"

The cop shifted his weight, apparently annoyed at how long this was taking.

"He was some kind of feriner. Had a suspicious soundin' accent."

"Russian?"

"Yeah, probably. But I don't know a Russkie from a Pole, from a Czech. They all sound alike to me."

Hatfield shook his head. This cop was definitely not detective material.

"What did the woman look like?"

"Hot!" The cop showed his first real sign of interest. "She was a real babe. She wasn't young, probably in her 40s. But...she was sexy, kinda like Tina Turner."

"What was she wearing?"

The cop shuffled his feet and looked to the floor for a minute. "She had this great form-fitting top. It was maroon with some snaps and buckles. Under it she had a gray sweater. It really showed off her...well...you know. And black slacks. And boots. Slacks fit her great. Real nice, if you know what I mean," he said, winking at Hatfield conspiratorially. "It almost looked like a uniform."

"With the insignia missing?" Hatfield asked, remembering something Dr. Nichols had said.

"Yeah. Like a uniform with its insignia missing."

Hatfield ushered the cop to the police artist and waited for him to sketch the mystery woman. He had just about used up all his favors with the police artists. Fortunately, if the garbage collector was right about seven people coming out of the "invisible something," this should be the last one he needed.

When the sketch was finished Hatfield had to agree with the cop. She was a babe. But best of all, he finally had a point of reference. He would go to the corner of Jason and Mathers and do some good old fashioned leg work, looking for people who had seen Gillian or any of his seven suspects.

It didn't take long. A few blocks from the intersection an antique dealer remembered having seen Kirk and Spock. He remembered them being a little strange. Kirk had sold him a pair of antique glasses for about one quarter of their worth.

The dealer specifically remembered Spock because of his outfit. And one thing they had said to each other during the transaction had stood out. Spock had asked Kirk whether the glasses had been a birthday present from Dr. McCoy. Kirk had said that they would be again.

At his next stop Hatfield bought a popsicle and stood on the corner enjoying it and thinking, as suddenly a city bus pulled up to pick up passengers. A city bus with a Cetacean Institute sign on the side.

It can't be this easy, Hatfield thought. He tossed his popsicle stick in the trash and climbed aboard. The driver nodded when Hatfield identified himself and asked whether he had driven the Sausalito route on the 12th. Hatfield showed him his sketches of the Admiral and Spock.

The driver's face lit up. "Hey! Them's our heroes! That one'" he pointed at Spock--"he knocked out one of them damned punk rock kids who was blastin' us with his godawful music."

"Knocked him out? You mean he hit him?"

"Nah, nothin' violent. He jes reached over and teched him like--on the shoulder. Like he pinched him. I don't know. Maybe he hypnotized him. All I know is the kid passed out and the noise stopped."

Hatfield tried to make sense of this information. "Where'd they get off the bus?"

"At the Institute--you know--where they kept George and Gracie."

I

George and Gracie. Hatfield sat at his desk that afternoon, wondering what ever had happened to George and Gracie. According to the

Cetacean Institute's Director, they had attached radio beacons to George and Gracie so they could track their migration. Only a few hours after they were released to the ocean, the signals had disappeared. It might have been whalers, but usually they don't bother to destroy the beacons until they get to a port.

The office boy walked in to deliver the detective room's copy of USA Today. Being senior officer, Hatfield had first dibs. When he got to the international page, one article caught his attention immediately: "Russian Whaler v. UFO. UFO Wins!" The short article said simply that a Russian whaling boat reported that it had been driven off two whales by a strange UFO which had come out of the sky. The "Save the Whales" organization was reported as commenting that it would welcome any help it could get to protect the whales, even extraterrestrial.

*

That night Hatfield took Ran'al to Pizza Hut for Dinner. Ran'al could eat more pizza than any three kids his age. Hatfield always plied Ran'al with pizza when he wanted to have a serious talk.

"So what's it this time dad?" Ran'al asked while slurping down a melting string of mozzarella.

"Huh?"

"What's it this time? You only bring me to Pizza Hut when you've got a problem."

Hatfield snorted. "You're too smart for your britches, boy."

Ran'al grinned at him between bites.

"I thought we ought to talk about the yard sale this weekend."

Ran'al looked at his dad over his fourth slice of pizza. "Dad, you didn't have to buy me pizza to talk about the yard sale."

Hatfield reached across the table and whacked his son on the head with a menu. "Ok, smart alec, what do you think about time travel?"

"Time travel?"

Hatfield nodded, his mouth full of pizza.

"Like in 'Back to the Future'?"

"Yeah."

Ran'al shrugged. "I dunno. It's interesting. I've read some good time travel stories."

"Like what?"

"The Man Who Folded Himself and The Time Machine."

"Do you think its possible?"

"Geez Dad, I don't know. I'm just a kid, not a physicist." He stuffed some more pizza into his mouth and stared intently at his dad while chewing. "Why?"

"It's a case I'm working on. It's bizarre. The evidence all points inescapably to one conclusion. But I don't dare tell anyone. They'll think I'm crazy."

"Tell me, Dad. I won't think you're crazy."

Hatfield thought for a moment and then began to tell his son about space travelers from the future who needed two hunchback whales for some reason, probably an emergency or they would have been better prepared before they came. The trip through time had probably damaged their ship and they needed something from the nuclear reactor of the U.S.S. Enterprise. They befriended Gillian Taylor, and when it came time to return to the future, she went with them.

Ran'al hadn't touched the pizza since his Dad had begun the story. He stared at Hatfield now, not quite sure whether he was serious. He decided he was.

"Neato!"

"Neato?"

"Yeah, Dad. Is that what you really think happened to her?"

"I'm afraid so."

Ran'al began shoving pizza into his mouth. You gonna tell them, Dad?"

"They won't believe me."

"No, they won't."

"Do you?"

"Yeah."

"What do you think I ought to do?"

Ran'al thought about it for a minute.

"Write a book."

"Huh?"

"A book. Write a book. It's a great plot for a mystery novel!"

Hatfield sat contentedly, rocking in his handmade rocking chair, watching the world go by, or at least that small piece of the world found in Elkhorn City, Kentucky. People waved to him as they walked by; he was the town celebrity; the home town boy become detective. And now he was an up-and-coming mystery writer.

His first book, *A Whale of a Time*, had been on the New York Times

best seller list for thirteen weeks. Last month it had set a record for paperback sales in its first week. Everyone was talking about the travelers from the future who came looking for hunchback whales to save the Earth of the 23rd century. Conservationists lauded it; "Save the Whales" presented him with a special award for helping to raise the world's consciousness.

Since then Hatfield had written three detective novels which were in various stages of production, and, with his son's help, was working on his second science fiction novel, using the same characters as in the first. He envisioned a whole series of novels revolving around the exploits of Admiral Kirk and his crew. Hatfield was in seventh heaven.

He heard the phone ring inside and in a moment Ran'al came to the door.

"Dad," the phone's for you."

"Who is it son? Another reporter?"

"Nah, Dad," Ran'al said. "Says his name's Harve Bennett. He wants to buy the movie rights to your book."

>

End
file.